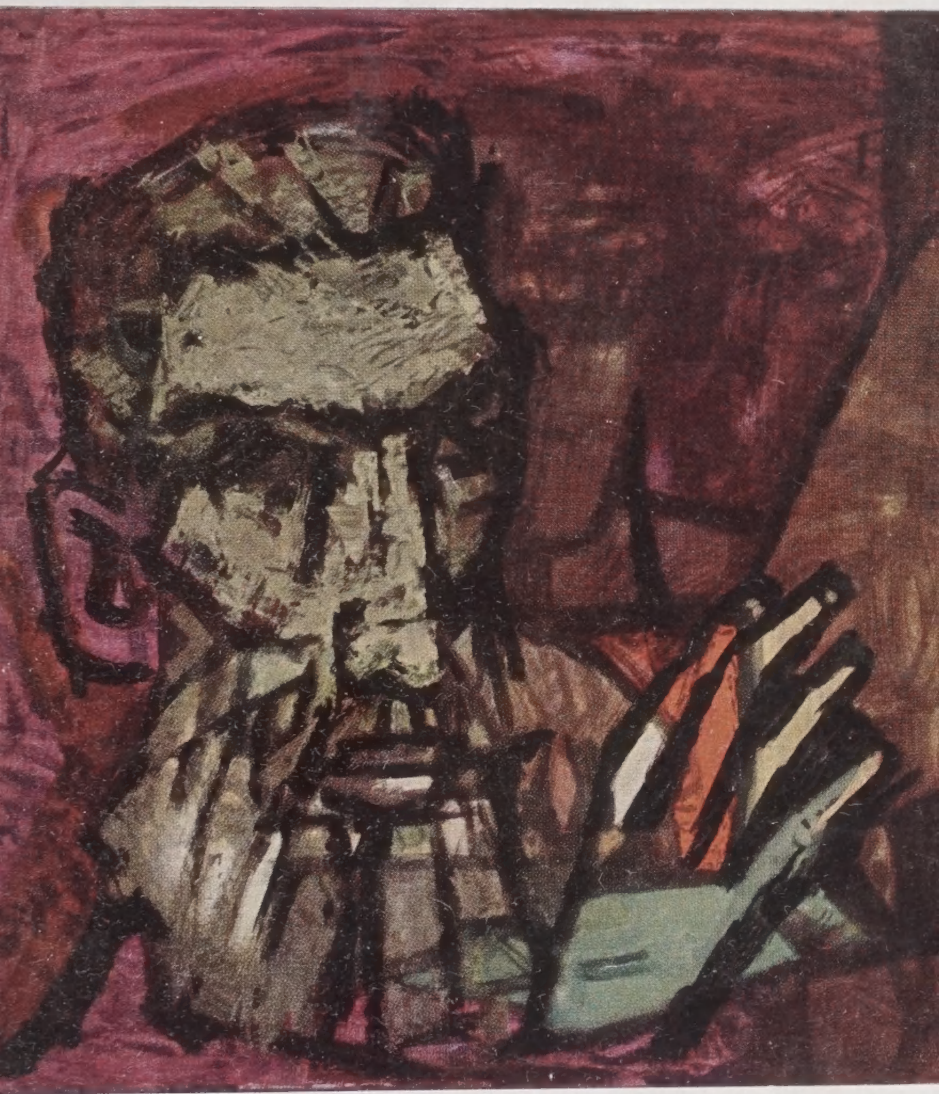
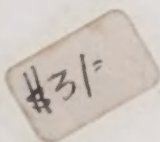


CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART SERIES



HUSAIN

LALIT KALĀ AKADEMI



LALIT KALĀ SERIES
OF
CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART

This series dealing with contemporary Indian Art has been undertaken by the Lalit Kala Akademi with the intention of popularising the work of India's leading painters and sculptors.

In conformity with the general policy of the Akademi these pocket books are being sold on a no profit basis. Each publication will contain a short note introducing the artist and a selection of his work to the public at large.

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HUSAIN

LALIT KALĀ AKADEMI

INDIA



1961

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M. F. HUSAIN

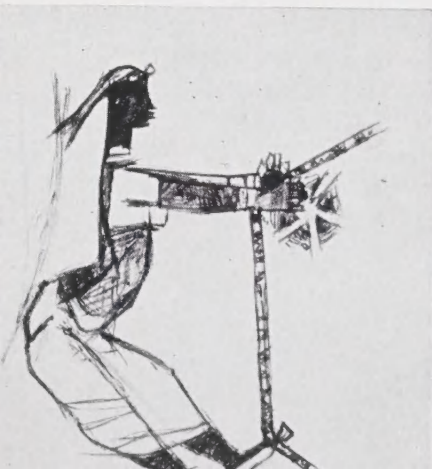
The presence of an ethic, in the sense in which this is a definable way of looking at life, is a marked feature of Maqbool Fida Husain's paintings. It is an ethic that is latent, and explicit, in his forms. Not only in what those forms may represent, for the forms may and often do represent nothing more nor less than an experience, but also in the way they are built, in the manner in which colour is applied and the line allowed to run.

Definition in his way of looking at things may limit an artist's expression, making a style for him and a circumscribed world ; there is therefore need for a satisfactory metaphor to prevent a narrowing of his creative world. Husain's metaphor is rich and of great expressiveness. It brings a wide sweep to his way of looking at things, to his many approaches to reality. His symbols and represented objects are often startling in juxtaposition because they are drawn from such far reaches of artistic memory. Dark, intuitive, sometimes traditional symbols are cast within a contemporary design and given meanings that seem valid for this and every other time. And if the innocent in art is also the original, as indeed it is, then innocence is the other noteworthy feature of Husain's work. It is an ingrained innocence, of the man, and some of the best of this otherwise essentially contemporary artist is almost archaic in flavour.

Husain was born at Sholapur, in Maharashtra, in 1915. His father worked in a textile mill, the atmosphere of the home was middle-class, pious and strict. Husain read Iqbal's Urdu poetry of intellectual passion, received a year's formal training at the Indore School of Art, fixed himself a daily quota of portraits to be painted, and rode out on his bicycle every evening, with a lantern, to paint the landscape around Indore. What he saw in the light of day he sometimes translated to the canvas in the light of that lantern, and thus developed a quick, retentive eye, and an uncanny feeling for colour. Although he did not know it, that lantern in a darkening landscape was also symbolic, for his subsequent painting has been essentially expressionistic and his painterly journey within himself had already begun.

Later, Husain moved to Bombay and became a designer of cinema sets. He continued his self-education in art, giving himself a rigorous training in drawing, making forays into the Medical College to study anatomy, making flat wooden toys whose gay taut shapes and colours fascinated him, reproducing cinema scenes from memory on to canvas. He studied Rembrandt during this period, and Augustus John, and painted realistic portraits of subjects drawn from the teeming life of the city, and thus supported himself. In 1948 he visited Delhi. Here, for the first time, he saw the full-breasted, free-standing female figures of the ancient Mathura sculpture and the brilliant flatly applied colours of Indian miniature painting that defied

perspective. To the influence of Bombay's West-orientated Progressive Group of painters a new, and decisive influence was thus added. Since then Husain has travelled extensively through Europe and America, exhibiting his own work, avidly studying at close quarters the modern world's art, and its older treasures, and



coming home to paint in an idiom that is unique in contemporary India for being his own and that has so powerfully influenced present Indian painting.

Originality is the myth of painting, said Roger de la Fresnaye, adding that, imitating or rejecting, one is always influenced. Imitating and rejecting therefore you make a design for your art. Add a garnish of your own sensibility and if the whole holds together in a remembered strangeness you may have an art that is your own.

A lesser painter than Husain would have disintegrated under the variety of influences to which he has exposed himself. There is a fissure in the recent tradition of Indian painting, a loss of continuity and a withering of roots, and for those who reject the traditional forms it is easy to borrow a bastard mood along with the manner and thus become facile. For those who do not reject the traditional manner, the danger is greater. All over the world, the coming of modernity in the arts has meant a movement from adoration to terror and pity, and the traditional forms of Indian painting were not made for terror.

There is a dissolution and rearranging of values in Indian art, and in the society that gives it life, and the artistic susceptibility being in the forefront of social awareness, has to take note of this dissolution and bend its forms to it accordingly. For the genuinely contemporary Indian artist therefore many translations are necessary. He has to depict a new human situation not experienced in the art of his tradition, or experienced and rendered with a different manner of personal and social belief, and he has to forge a new idiom for its expression. That idiom has also to be palpably Indian in order



that it may remain unique and not be lost in the rootless reaches of today's art in general.

Husain's creative translations or transmutations of form and reality, have been made with éclat. An artist's idiom is a matter of line, form and colour, symbol and metaphor. Husain wields a quick, nervous line of great sensitiveness and energy. It is a versatile line, capable of both power and poetry. It divides his forms in firm definition, broods among his grouped figures. It pounds across the canvas in his horses, lurks in women's faces in a tender almost tentative hint, or threads sharply across his compositions like a scalpel, separating one figure, one face, from the other in subtly differentiated tones of colour, as though he sculpted his figures from paint.

But impeccable draughtsman that he is, Husain is a greater painter and his line is never conceived apart from form and colour, from his exacting demands of spatial organisation. He has spent years exploring the interaction of line and colour in his paintings. Sometimes he has allowed his line greater definition, allowed it to build and divide with power; at others he has sought a more muted line, working inwards from the edges of his canvas, towards a face or a form, and stopping with the line only a suggestion. The result of these years has been a realisation that line moves faster than colour, that the eye catches the colour quicker but also retains it longer than the line.

Husain is no theorist, and others before him have made a similar discovery. He himself came to it slowly, independently, evolving it from those earlier paintings in which broken and flat masses of colour were accentuated in figures often derived from wooden toys. The lines of those paintings were set the task of inclosing

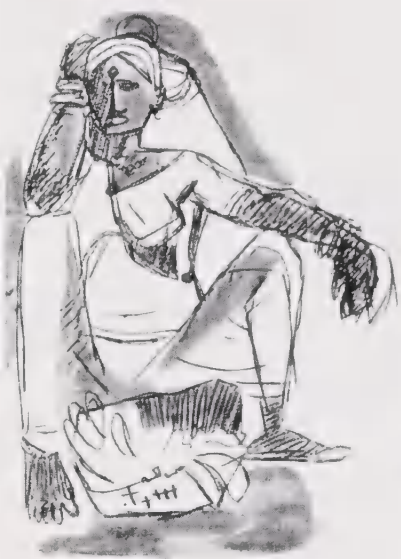


the colour, or breaking it up. Some distortion was employed, imparting tension to the figures and, with the colour pressing against the line, the whole fell into compositions of joyous and rhythmic stillness.

The years have tempered that joy. There is a mellow quality about it now, a quality of compassion, for the years have brought greater thought to Husain's art, more pain, an awareness of darkness where there is light. A feeling has grown in him that the state of man, specifically Indian within the universal man, is a suffering state of being. It is an antiheroic state, only it is not negative or nihilistic for it has the martyr's affirmation in it. Husain's men and women, outwardly simple and unsophisticated, are highly conscious beings. They are conscious of being channels through which life runs its course. Very often they are caught listening and intent upon that flood within them, tense because of what they hear, with eyes of solemn curiosity and a mantle of silence around them. Even in groups, sitting or standing together, these men and women are supremely solitary. They do not communicate with each other. They remain locked in a binding compassion, in a unity of colour and composition divided by a wondrously understanding line. Husain does not only represent life, he annotates it, and the postulate of that annotation is the utter marvel of it all.

The prime symbol of Husain's total view of life is the woman, again perhaps the Indian woman. For pain comes to woman as her natural state, the giving of birth and, because of birth, an awareness of dissolution. Woman is the sentient point of man's natural being. She has curiosity, she suffers, she gives birth willingly. There is pity in her eyes, as there is love in her breast. Man is, according to Husain, virile only in heroism, is broken by pain. Husain paints women because these are not





heroic times and, tenderly joyous or suffering, women remain vital.

With a comprehensive view of life investing them, Husain has progressively laid bare his figures. They are given no landscape of time and place, no background except carefully worked tonal tensions. These figures have no drapery. They come clothed only in colour, naked except for a gay turban here, a hint of hair or jewellery there. They come from a territory of the mind, at once idea and living

reality. Their validity is in the soft and warm curve of their flesh, in the look in their eyes, in the separateness that marks them essentially human. They come from a territory, however, recognisably Indian in its sensibility and symbolisation : contemplative, brooding, often heavy with the mystery of life. Men here are gay or thoughtful ; women are lyrical, sad, watchful, knowing and curious, fecund without being sensual.

This amalgam of life is rendered by Husain with a wealth of metaphor. Its apprehension is instinctive ; its rendering marked by conscious thought. There is no stampede of emotion. Husain's paintings are neither anecdotal nor dramatic. There is no shrill protest at the pain that enters with life. Suffering is folded in, contained. It flecks the eyes, as does an avid curiosity, a pride of living. A taut discipline binds everything ; feeling with its distilled rendering, the line with its colour, space with its severely controlled use. Every stroke of that swift and nervous brush is made to count. There is utmost economy in Husain's compositions, and therefore strength.

Objects are given significance beyond their concrete reality. A tree becomes all crystal-green leaf, all leafiness in rich applications of colour, all idea of leafiness. There are geometric designs. A rotund moon is darkened and criss-crossed by lines,

for light and darkness always come locked with each other, and life is only the balance between the two. Some of Husain's symbols are drawn from folk art and are traditional. His manner of using them, however, while retaining the original impulse, takes them much beyond their original simple meanings. The human hand for instance, an expressive symbol in Indian dance, recurs frequently in Husain's paintings. It is usually given an independent life, almost separate from the body to which it belongs. It occurs with mystic markings on the palm, is lightly made, sometimes deeply shadowed, inclosed as though upon a secret.

There are other, intuitive, almost archaic symbols to mark the dark power of life, a more savage metaphor. Cactii appear beside indrawn female figures. Spiders hang from phallic lamps. Horses charge across massive canvases, nostrils dilated, lips drawn back as though in a savage pain of passion. Horses that are built with stabbing lines, in strangely disturbing grey, white, and brown. They rush across the canvas to be brought up short by an erect phantasmal figure. A woman, naked, light and full-bodied, is carried aloft on a cloven figure of a horse, as though on an exploding charge of life. There are bulls and serpents, eagles upon women's thighs. A darkened moon hangs suspended above an exquisitely formed girl swinging from a tree that is all leaf. A fat brown-black sun rolls on the ground, at the hooves of running horses.

Not all of Husain's paintings are ideograms, nor are they all, naturally, filled with such unquiet power. There are quieter moods. These belong to some of his portraits of individuals and groups, and to his occasional landscapes. His Jaipur during the Holi festival is gay in erotic abandon; Banaras smoulders in wax and ink, with age, skeletal houses crowding its streets.

Intellect is at the centre of Husain's art. In all that he paints reality has a fugitive quality because it comes finally from the mind. As a consequence, his figures are stylised. Forms are not represented, they are rebuilt. This is the traditional Indian approach to artistic reality: its central fact is first apprehend-

ed and the figure, or group of figures, is then rearranged around that central reality. The result is a distortion of form that comes from within and is not formalistic. It is a variation on the theme of reality, and remains recognisable for what it is. There is a gain in structural clarity, and the figure achieves just that much ambiguity as seems of life itself.

The rebuilding of forms is done with a full awareness of the value of line and colour. The lines race, jab, or are muted. There is an unfailing energy about them. Where the lines are finely made the colours run into each other in subtle tones, and the whole appears as a distillation of thought and feeling. Bright colours are caught and gaily streamered by variable lines. Contrasting masses of flat colours are used in place of chiaroscuro to create monumentality or a sense of petrification and timelessness. Against a strongly racing line, as in the paintings with horses, flat interrupted surfaces of colour are used to arrest movement, place power on a leash as it were, thereby atonce controlling and accentuating it. Colour itself is usually applied in a mixture of brush and knife, in swift sure strokes. The result of all this is a rich and vital art, an abstraction of power, movement and feeling in rare balance.

Husain has painted portraits, murals, landscape, nudes, gay balconies, time-eroded Banaras ghats, musical notations, friezes of movement, profane birds, twinkling elephants, familiar horses that look primeval, and primeval animals that insinuate familiarity. He is a fluent painter and when the mood takes him his output is considerable. There is great diversity in what he paints; diversity both of mood and manner. Yet, in all that diversity it is not necessary to look for any counter-principle of unity outside his art. The spirit of that art gives it unity. Husain is a highly introverted man of acute sensibilities, widely travelled, civilised, a product of present India. His is a humane art; an art of compassion and understanding. It has intellect and passion: it is capable of great joys and sorrows. It is an art of utmost significance in contemporary Indian painting.

Shiv S. Kapur.

महाइस











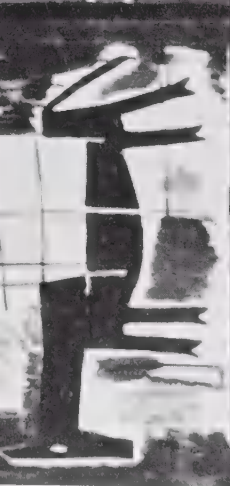
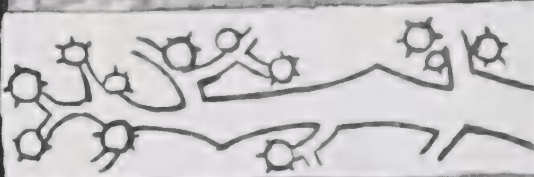
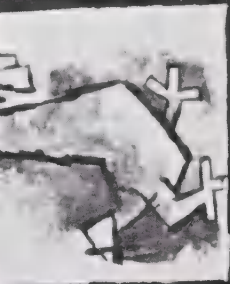
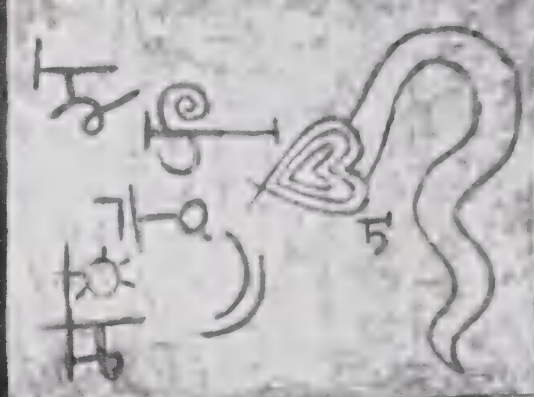


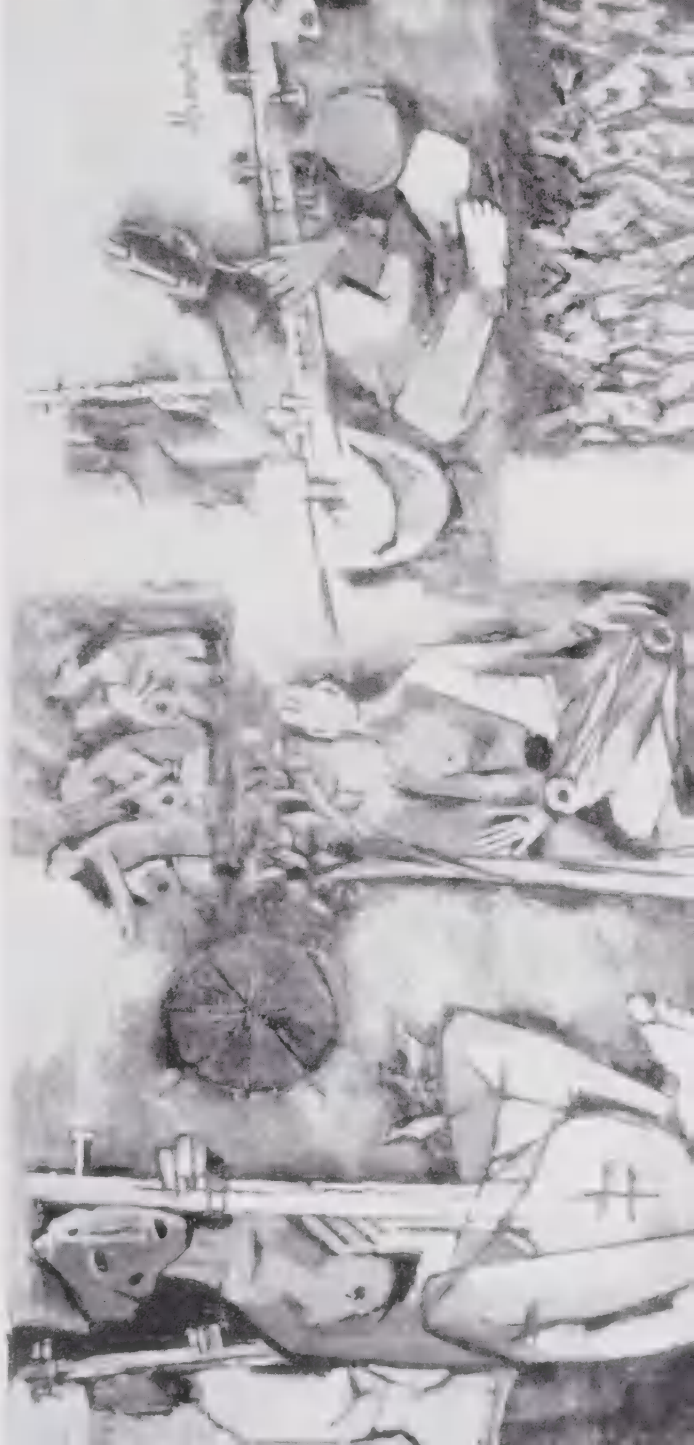




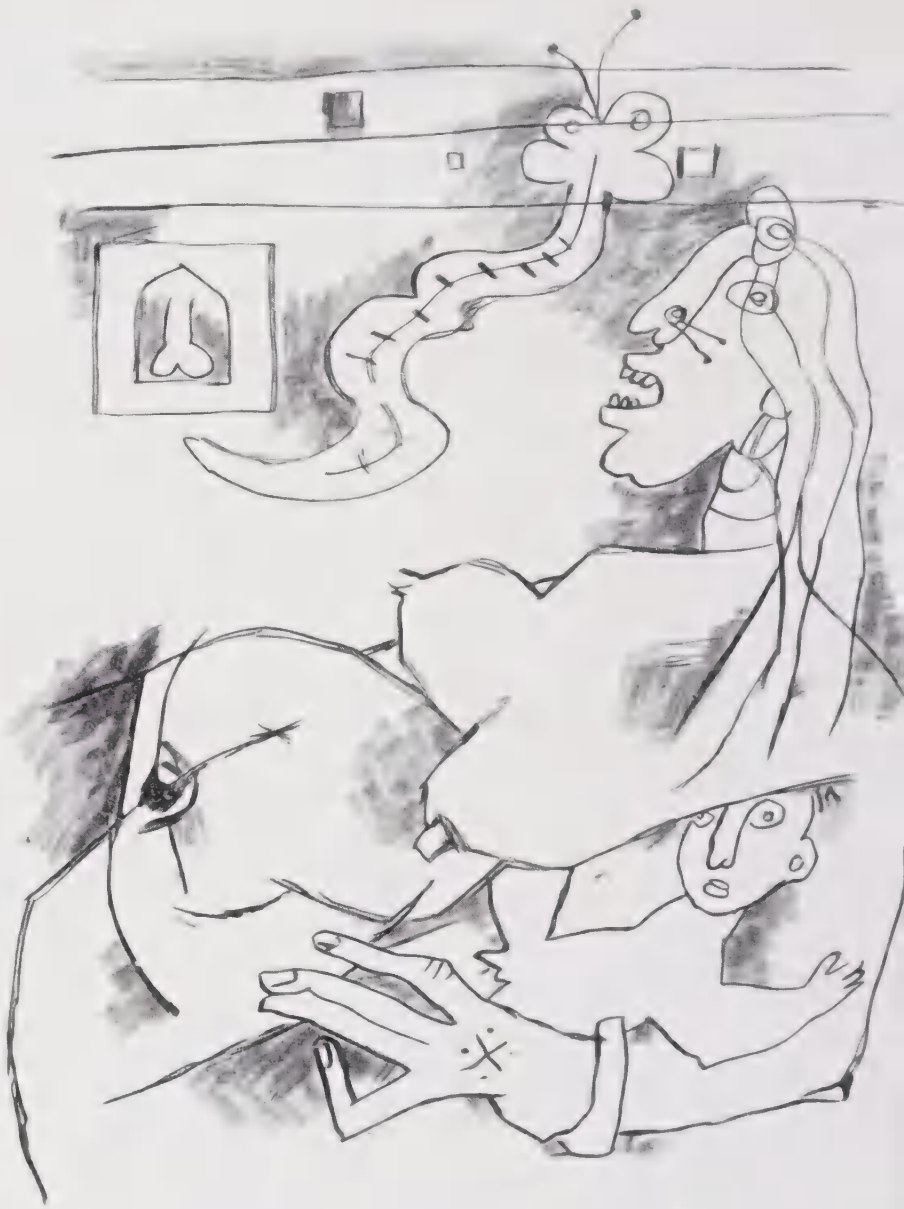




















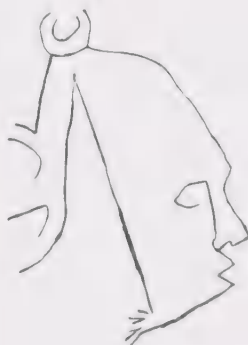
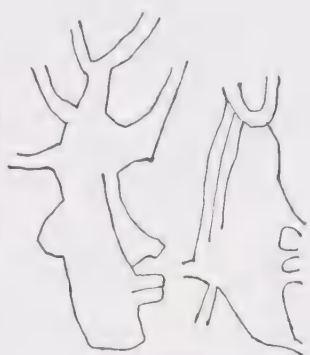
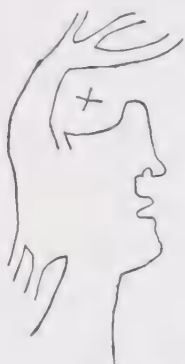
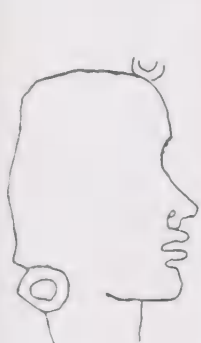














M. F. HUSAIN LALIT KALA AKADEMI

No.	Title	Medium	Year	Collection
1	Between Lamp and Spider	Oils	1956	Artist
2	I came across	Oils	1961	Mr. B. Chowdhury
3	Sadhus	Oils	1960	Artist
4	Devi	Oils	1961	Kunika Art Centre
5	Banaras	Oils	1960	Mr. M. J. Vander Gaag
6	Ragamalika	Oils	1960	Dr. H. J. Bhabha
7	Haldi	Oils	1962	Artist
8	Padmini	Oils	1960	Mr. Neville Wadia
9	Banaras	Oils	1961	Artist
10	Zamin (Detail)	Oils	1955	National Gallery of Modern Art
11	Green Song	Oils	1960	
12	Ragini	Oils	1961	Mr. B. Chowdhury
13	Holi	Pen	1961	Artist
14	Unidentified	Oils	1961	Artist
15	Shankara	Oils	1961	Bal Chhabda
16	Empty river bend	Oils	1960	Mr. Mulgaonkar
17	Horses	Oils	1961	Mr. Neville Wadia
18	Village life	Oils	1960	Miss Giovanna Rally
19	Poet Vajd	Oils	1961	Sikandarali Vajd
20	Bathers	Oils	1960	Mr. P. N. Thapar
21	Studio	Pen	1957	Artist

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

- 1915 Born at Sholapur; the family moved to Indore the same year.
- 1937 Settled in Bombay and started as a partner of Cinema hoardings.
- 1941 Began as a furniture and toy designer.
- 1947 Exhibited paintings for the first time and the work received considerable notice.
- 1948 Joined the Progressive Artists Group, Bombay.
- 1950 First One-man show, Bombay.
- 1953 Visited Europe for the first time.
- 1954 Nominated as an eminent artist member of the Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.
- 1955 First Award at the very first National Exhibition of Art of the Lalit Kala Akademi.
- 1956 One-man shows in Zurich and Prague.
- 1957 Painted Murals for Air India International at Hong Kong, Bangkok, Zurich and Prague.
- 1959 Won the International Biennale Award at Tokyo. Visited New York.
- 1960 One-man shows in Frankfurt and Rome.
- 1961 One-man show in Tokyo.

Husain has extensively exhibited his work in the country and has many awards to his credit. His paintings are in several public and private collections both in India and abroad.



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